

SUGGESTIONS ABOUT MAKING DONATIONS FOLLOWING A DISASTER

The United Way's National Donations Steering Committee composed of voluntary organizations active in disasters, federal, state and local government emergency management personnel has developed the following information for people interested in supporting disaster relief efforts.

1) Financial Contributions are Often the Best Kind of Donations to Make

Providing a financial contribution to a voluntary agency involved in disaster relief is often the most sensible and the most efficient way of helping the people in need after a disaster. There are several voluntary agencies with considerable disaster relief experience. These organizations have disaster skills in many areas such as disaster needs assessment, disaster clean-up, mass feeding, mass shelter, first aid, disaster counseling, pastoral care, child-care, home repair, family casework, meeting "unmet needs" and many other areas. When the public supports these organizations with financial contributions it helps ensure a steady flow of important services to the people in need after a disaster.

Cash contributions to voluntary agencies also make sense for other reasons. The voluntary agency will often spend the money in the local disaster area thus helping the local economy get back on its feet. Cash donations rather than unsolicited donated goods avoid the complicated, costly and time-consuming process of collecting, sorting, packing, transporting, unloading, resorting, storing, repackaging, and distributing the goods. Cash donations to voluntary agencies help meet peoples' needs more precisely as the voluntary agency is in a better position to purchase what the people need or can provide vouchers for people to purchase what they need. Cash donations to recognized relief organizations are also tax deductible.

2) Used Clothing is Rarely a Useful Item to Collect for Disaster Relief

Used clothing is rarely a useful item to collect and send into the disaster area because it is hard to clean, sort, pack, transport, store, and distribute. Mounds of clothing take up valuable warehouse space and frequently end up being discarded. Constructive things to do with used clothing are to have a yard sale to raise money for the disaster relief organizations that provide goods and services that the disaster survivors really need. Used clothing and other small items can also be donated locally to help community-based organizations in the local area.

3) Confirm the Need Before Beginning a Collection of Donated Goods

The most effective way the public can assist is to support the experienced disaster relief organizations with either financial contributions or in-kind goods and services that the organizations report are needed. Many of the experienced voluntary agencies involved in disaster relief have toll-free numbers for the public to call in order to learn what kind of donated goods might be needed in the disaster area. Often, when large-scale disasters occur in a State, that State's Office of Emergency Management, working closely with the voluntary agencies, will establish a toll-free Donations Coordination Hotline for the public to call in order to find out what donated goods and services are needed, if any.

It is often a mistake to assume what is needed in a disaster. Over the years, there has been considerable waste of countless tons of clothing because it was collected and sent with no prior coordination. Try to get more precise information before collecting any donated goods.

4) Donate Goods Through an Organization

It is never a good idea to collect goods for disaster relief without a firm plan in place that

confirms the goods are needed and addresses which groups will receive the goods, how they will be transported, and how the goods will be distributed. Experienced disaster relief organizations base their disaster relief activities on overall disaster situation assessments and detailed needs assessments.

Many relief groups, if interested in the donated goods, have some infrastructure in place to store and distribute the goods. Coordination with the relief group is essential so that the right goods are collected, the right amount is collected, and that the logistics issues of transportation, warehouse and staging area coordination, and distribution are fully discussed. Donors will find that it is often most practical to focus on one or two items that an organization says is needed rather than collect a variety of items.

5) Transportation Must Be Planned in Advance

Transportation is frequently a major challenge for donors. It must be planned in advance otherwise a donor can easily be stuck with large amounts of donated goods and no means to bring it to the recipient agency in the disaster area.

Do not assume unsolicited relief supplies will be transported at no charge or at government expense. The donor has the primary responsibility to find transportation for the donated goods. Local trucking firms may be willing to help in times of disaster, if funds are available to cover part of the expense. Often, donors raise money themselves to put towards the transportation of the donated supplies.

6) Donated Goods Must be Well Packed and Labeled

After confirming that the goods are needed and there is a plan to receive, store, and distribute them, be sure that the goods are properly sorted, packaged and labeled. If unsure, discuss these steps with an experienced disaster relief organization. Specific content lists should be taped to the side of each box sent. This allows the receiving officials to determine what is in the box without opening it, and gets it to the proper distribution location in a timely manner. Put yourself in the shoes of the person on the receiving end of the shipment and think about making the unloading, unpacking, warehousing, and distribution as simple as possible.